

Rowland Unified votes for school closure, other cuts

By Maritza Velazquez, Staff Writer

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ROWLAND HEIGHTS - During a special meeting Tuesday, the Rowland Unified school board voted 4-1 to close a school.

Attempting to close a \$7.3 million budget gap by next year, officials said the closure would save the district about \$500,000. The closure was approved with several other cost-saving measures.

Officials did not name a specific school for closure, but a committee has been put together to make the recommendation by May.

"I (voted for it) mainly because we've been able to keep all of the schools open for the past three years while other school districts have been closing schools," said board member Robert Hidalgo. "I think we've just reached the threshold now. It makes no sense to have multiple schools with less than 400 students at each school."

Hidalgo said that this was a preliminary decision and the board would revisit it in May.

The decision would depend on negotiations with its teachers and classified staff unions, as well as a court decision regarding Walnut Valley Unified's District of Choice program.

Rowland Unified officials are attempting to stop Walnut Valley Unified from taking 460 students next year.

According to Rowland Unified's Deputy Superintendent Bob Wertz, the district's loss of students to Walnut Valley would cost \$2.4 million annually.

"The big unknown for us is the District of Choice case that's pending," Hidalgo said. "If we come out victorious on that, then the cuts wouldn't have to be as severe. They're pretty conservative estimates."

School board member Gilbert Garcia said the committee does not have adequate time to choose which school to close.

He was the only board member to vote against school closure.

"Based on my experience and listening to other school districts who have taken up to a year to do that study, two months doesn't sound reasonable to me," he said.

When choosing which school to close, the committee will consider: the school's enrollment, the cost-savings, the age of the school and the cost of transporting students to other campuses.

The board also unanimously voted Tuesday to reduce arts and music by \$100,000, cut adult education by \$212,000 and lay off counselors and a psychologist, among other measures.

"They have to cut money in so many different places," said Ezekiel Chavez, a Nogales High School teacher and Association of Rowland Educators representative. "They're trying to do their best in that respect."

Officials said the district is still in talks with its teachers classified staff unions to negotiate furloughs, pay cuts and a reduced work year.

This month, 75 teachers were handed preliminary layoff notices.

Chavez and others have criticized the district about unfairly cutting teachers over administrators.

But Garcia said administrators have also been warned of their possible termination, but final decisions will not be made until May.

"These are the toughest of times," Garcia said. "Any decision is not one that's taken lightly."

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